

Up Stream!

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Conservation Conversation

*Upstream . . .
Against the flow,
Bodies twisting . . .
Watch them go!*

In the spring of 2007, the Conservation department launched an attempt to bring the alewife herring back to Duxbury's Island Creek. Historically, herring runs up that waterway had been an important yearly event. So many fish swam upstream to spawn that in 1693 local laws were created to govern who could harvest the fish, how the harvest would be used, where and how dams supplying power to mills could be built and when the dams had to be opened for spawning fish.

As the town grew, grain and saw mills were built along waterways where dams utilized the power of fast-flowing water. Eventually those early mills were abandoned but their dams remained because roads had been built above them.

Duxbury's first fish ladder was constructed in 1702, the year town laws were passed specifically mentioning the words "free and clear" passage for fish in Island Creek. Those words were next used in similar bylaws in 1736, possibly for a second fish ladder, and over the years, Island Creek has been cleared many times to make it easier for herring to return to Island Creek Pond. In 1945 the longest ladder was repaired and in 2004 the creek was cleared by Boy Scout Troop 62. In 2006 the troop again cleared the creek and a second ladder was reconstructed. But despite all those efforts, no herring appeared.

Then in 2007, Conservation Agent Joe Grady reintroduced herring to Duxbury. The fish he netted came from Plymouth where each spring their Town Creek teems with egg-laden herring. Those netted herring were released into Island Creek Pond to spawn.

It is supposed to take young herring seven years swimming around in the Atlantic Ocean before they obey their instincts and return to a birth pond to spawn. So in 2014, volunteer herring watchers were in place at the town's two fish ladders to begin the annual count. Those volunteers spent many hours on that first seven year anniversary monitoring Duxbury's two ladders. They diligently watched for herring to count while recording water temperatures and other data in the ladder logs. Unfortunately, no fish were spotted that year.

Then in 2015, the first herring finally appeared and Duxbury's numbers have continued to climb. Each spring prior to the herring run, the stretches of Island Creek from Elm St. to Tremont and Tremont to Bay Rd. are cleared of downed trees and brush that can discourage herring. This is tough work – wading through brush and briar choked rushing water, hauling along saws, loppers and hooks. The creek in places is only inches deep while other areas hold over three feet of cold water waiting to rush in over the tops of hip boots. Some of the bottom is hard packed gravel but in a split second a rubber boot can sink up to a foot in clutching mud. This year Jon McGrath and Tom Nichols thankfully helped out the Conservation Department with this grueling task.

Soon herring will return to spawn once more and volunteers are again needed to spend periods of ten minutes or so patiently waiting and watching. As the first herring appear to twist and turn their way up the ladders, volunteers will count and record the data needed to complete this annual spring study. If you are able to spend a few ten minute periods doing this between now and June 15 while fighting off the urge to snooze to the burbling sounds of water flowing over the ladders, the Conservation office will be in your debt. The rules are easy to learn and can be found on the internet at herringrun.info. You can click on the "How to Count" tab to learn how to recognize herring and record your findings in log books at each location.



Volunteers Jon McGrath (right) and Tom Nichols haul cut brush from Island Creek's upper section.

There are two places for counting herring on Island Creek: The fish ladder on the east side of Route 3A that drains from Mill Pond and the fish ladder on the east side of Elm Street just west of where Toby Garden Street ends after passing the parking lot at Island Creek Pond. Both sites have tool boxes with log books plus thermometers to report what you have or have not seen.

The Conservation department is hoping for an even higher count this year but counters are needed who can spend ten minutes every so often watching for herring. Just sitting by the rushing water is relaxing but we're hoping your experience will be brought to a zenith of excitement by actually seeing and recording some herring! Some watchers make this an annual family event bringing their children along to share in the excitement of spotting the silvery herring fighting their way upstream. If you can do this whenever you are able, your efforts will be appreciated – whether or not you record any fish.

The Conservation office will not attempt to set up a schedule for herring spotting but, as in past years, will rely on volunteers to do the counting whenever it fits their schedules. If you can help with this, call Steve Donovan at 781-837-7782 or email him at donovansteve568@gmail.com.

Volunteers Jon McGrath (right) and Tom Nichols haul cut brush from Island Creek's upper section.